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CNF Workshop

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Growing Up *Mexicana*

We can move back to Mexico once you’ve learned to speak English, *mija.* That’s what my mother told me every time I asked why we couldn’t just go back to Mexico. It was obviously a lie, a really bad one, but I was six and at the time it made sense. My family and I lived in Chicago for the first few years, which allowed me to learn English at my own pace since 50 percent of my school’s population was Hispanic. We moved to Pocahontas, Arkansas in 2001, and we were literally the only foreigners there.

My first day of Catholic school was humiliating, partly because of my too-short-skirt, but mostly because of my too-thick-accent. I was reprimanded by the principal for not following the rules on the appropriate length for skirts and shorts that morning, which I thought was the worst thing that could happen. I was wrong. That afternoon, during our history lesson, Sister Pauline (our not-so-benevolent nun/teacher) asked me to read an excerpt from our book about the Hudson River. I read in my best voice, but I noticed that a couple of kids were snickering. At first, I dismissed it, but soon I realized they were making fun of my accent and I turned as red as the right side of the Mexican flag. That afternoon, I recorded my voice on the computer as I read the same excerpt. “Hot-son Ree-ver” I heard myself saying. I read the excerpt over and over again until I sounded as American as I could. I vowed I wouldn’t talk again in class until I perfected my American accent. That was the beginning of a very reserved childhood.

After a few weeks in school, I befriended a couple of girls from my class. The first time they visited my house, they were shocked to discover my mom stored pots and pans in the oven.

“My mom never uses the oven, so she just uses it as storage space,” I explained.

They were utterly confused, but decided not to ask any more questions. We spent the rest of the afternoon making prank calls and playing MASH just like any other group of 12-year-old girls and, for the moment, I forgot that I was any different from them. That night, my friend asked me to get a ride to Wal Mart from my dad. I went up to my dad and said,

“*Pa*, *mi amiga quiere ir a* Wal Mart,” I turned to look at her because I knew it was the only word out of that conversation that she would understand, I continued in Spanish, “but I don’t really want to go, so I’m just going to pretend to ask you for a ride, and all you have to do is say no, okay?”

My father just shook his head and went back to watching the 9 o’clock news. I looked to my friend with a look of disappointment. I realized that day that sometimes, being the only Spanish-speaking person in all of Pocahontas could come in very handy.

The next weekend, my friend invited me to her house. At 4 o’clock, dinnertime at my house, I asked her what was for dinner. She looked at me confused and informed me that dinner wasn’t going to be ready for a couple of hours.

“Oh, we usually eat right after school, but I guess it’s a Mexican thing,” I joked.

She laughed, but deep inside, I was embarrassed about the whole thing. When dinner time finally came around, her parents drilled me with questions. What do your parents do for a living? Did you come here legally? Can your parents speak English? How do you say my name in Mexican? And so on. Some of their questions were offensive, but I was the first foreigner they’d ever met, so I let it go.

“You look just like Selena!” her mom exclaimed at one point.

“Um…thank you?” I said, not sure if it was a compliment or an insult.

“Oh she’s a beautiful Latina woman! Or Hispanic—which do you prefer?” she asked.

“Honey, she’s Mexican!” her husband bellowed from across the table.

“I really don’t care which one you use,” I said, my face getting red.

My friend apologized for her parents later, and I said they were charming.

I’ll never forget what that same friend wrote in my yearbook senior year: “You were the first Mexican person I’d ever met and I have to admit: you changed my entire perception on Mexican people…”. She wasn’t the first or the last person to confess their initial prejudice towards me. At least I changed their minds.

Slowly, I began to feel like more of an asset to the Pocahontas community than a burden. In school, my teachers would always ask me to help them pronounce the Spanish terms in our books. My friends always asked me for help on their Spanish homework. Of course, every once in a while I’d be reminded that I was different from them. My family watched dramatic Mexican *novelas,* my friend’s families watched *American Idol.* My family snacked on potato chips with hot sauce and lime, my friend’s families snacked on barbecue chips. My friends visited their grandparents every other weekend, I saw my grandparents once a year, when we travelled to Mexico. I felt guilty pledging allegiance to a country that wasn’t my own every morning. Sometimes, I even kept my fingers crossed during the Pledge as if somehow that made me less of a traitor to my own country.

As a result of living in Mexico, Chicago, and Arkansas, I often get asked where the hell I’m from, because people just can’t figure out my accent. I tried so hard to rid myself of my Mexican accent that in some ways, I lost my identity. When I visit Mexico, I’m not Mexican enough. I try to fit in, but even my grandparents notice my “*gringa*” accent. Now when I visit Mexico, I feel like more of a tourist than a native. When I was younger, I remember thinking that since I’d lived in Mexico for six years, after living in the states for seven years, I’d officially become American. Although it seems silly, that idea has a lot of truth to it. I’ve slowly assimilated into the American culture, so much that the only time I feel truly Mexican is when I show my love of spicy foods.

It could be worse, however. My younger sister was born in 1999, after we’d been living in the U.S. for over three years. She has never lived in Mexico, although she visits often. Since the time she could walk, she’s been watching television in English, listening to music in English, and speaking to her friends and siblings in English. The only Spanish she ever heard came from my mom and dad. As a result, her Spanish-speaking skills are very poor. She constantly feels like she can’t communicate with her own mother because of the language barrier. I feel partially responsible for this because, to this day, I never speak Spanish with her. Her biggest concern is not being Mexican enough. She doesn’t speak the language, and her best attempts sound like the typical kid in a third year Spanish class. I find it very ironic that at her age, I was struggling to learn English and to assimilate to the American culture, and she’s struggling to speak Spanish and be more Mexican.

Slowly, I’ve learned to be proud of being Mexican. I still cringe a little at the occasional racist jokes people make, but as I’ve matured I’ve learned to make fun of myself. Yes, I love tacos. Yes, some of my family is here illegally. Yes, my family is wonderful and hard-working and we all love this country. I earned multiple scholarships because I’m Mexican, and I’m eternally grateful for that. People often ask if I’m only half Mexican, but I inform them that I’m 100 percent Mexican. They tell me I don’t look Mexican, and I feel a bit guilty that I take this as a compliment. I guess all I can say is that I’m proud to be Mexican-American.